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THE MIRACLE PLAY OF THE RIO GRANDE.

As the holy season of Advent approaches, one cannot fail to notice among the inhabitants of the Mexican ranches and towns of the Lower Rio Grande, Texas, a degree of bustle and unwonted activity, particularly about the hour of sunset, which indicates that the normal placidity or apathy of life has been seriously disturbed, and that some grand "funcion," more important than wedding, funeral, christening, baile, or even "marromas" (tight-rope walkers) or "tetires" (puppet-show), is in process of incubation.

Inquiry will elicit the reply: "Pues, son los pastores, no mas," — (Why, it's nothing but the Shepherds!), while a more persistent investigation will be rewarded with the information that the "pastores" are having an "ensayo," or rehearsal of their dramatic representation of the "Nacimiento," or birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem.

A few lines descriptive of this homely, crudely constructed, but feelingly acted miracle play, for such it is, may not be without interest to many of the readers of the Journal of Folk-Lore. It goes without saying, of course, that this play is Roman Catholic in origin, and, beyond question, a transplantation from beyond sea, where, until a very late period, miracle plays and moralities, under one guise or another, prevailed in all Christian countries.

While it is not logical to jump too suddenly to conclusions, I take it upon myself here to say that this particular form of miracle play has, in all probability, come to us from the Canary Islands, whose inhabitants furnished the contingent of immigrants who settled the northern part of Mexico from Monterey to San Antonio, and the valley of the Lower Rio Grande from Piedras Negras almost to its mouth.

Making every allowance for provincialisms and anachronisms which would naturally enough attach themselves to the play in its new *habitat*, the "Nacimiento" is to-day just what it must have been in the Spanish Isles two hundred years ago.

The *locus* of the play is supposed to be Palestine, and the *dramatis personæ* include, besides the Holy Mother and Babe, — whose presence, however, in our days is suggested rather than revealed, as a *présibi*, or manger, is generally erected, before which the actors stand, — a Chorus of Shepherds and Shepherdesses, a Head Shepherd, Michael the Archangel, Lucifer and several of his Imps, and an aged “*Ermitaño*,” or Hermit, whose life has been passed in devout contemplation, and who now, bent with age and hoary of beard, admonishes and advises the ignorant herders who resort to him for spiritual consolation.

There are several rather ludicrous incongruities which may be recognized without giving offence to the pious fervor of the actors and actresses, who become intensely wrought up in their parts as the plot unfolds. The Hermit carries, attached to his waist, a rosary made of wooden spools, and bears in his right hand a large crucifix, although the Saviour has not yet been born and his Passion is all yet to be undergone. In every case that I saw or heard of, the rosary was made of these large wooden spools.

Whenever it could be conveniently done, Lucifer was dressed in the uniform of a cavalry officer, but time is working changes, and at this writing his Satanic Majesty enacts his rôle in raiment not so pronouncedly martial.

For weeks beforehand the actors selected meet under the superintendence of the Head Shepherd (in the present case an intelligent cobbler), and listen attentively and patiently while he reads, line by line and word by word, the part of each. Very few of them can read or write, and none of them in a manner betokening extensive practice; the dependence for success, therefore, is almost wholly upon eye, ear, and memory, and the rehearsals are repeated again and again, until every man, woman, and child can recite the lines almost mechanically.

The Shepherds and Shepherdesses are in gala dress, and provided with elaborately decorated “*ganchos*,” or crooks, one of which may now be seen in the National Museum at Washington. The Archangel Michael is distinguishable by his wings and remorseless sword, as well as by the rancor with which he at all times assails his old adversary, the Son of the Morning. Both Michael and Lucifer rant a little too much to satisfy critical taste, but allowance must be made that the event they contemplate is the crucial epoch in the life of mankind, and both are speaking to influence suffrages in their favor.

There are ceaseless repetitions, and promenades and counter-marches without end or object, save, perhaps, to allow each artist opportunity for a nasalized enunciation of his verses, in chant or monologue.

The first rehearsal which I witnessed lasted over three hours, and all the others nearly the same time, yet both actors and audience maintained a stolid and dogged attention beyond all praise.

The music is inferior and the singing execrable, because the voices of the women and men of the Lower Rio Grande are generally too attenuated and stridulous to be pleasing ; nevertheless there are occasional snatches of harmony which dwell agreeably in memory.

Unlike the theatrical and acrobatic representations, there are no fixed charges for admission to the "Pastores ;" those who have money are expected to pay, and those who have none are made welcome without it.

But, much after the manner of the Christmas carols of Old England, the "Pastores" will gladly go from house to house of the more wealthy, enacting their parts with all due fervor, and expecting in return a largess of hospitality and a small pittance in money.

The church of late years has set its face against the appearance of the "Pastores" within the walls of sacred edifices, but they are looked upon as innocent and harmless, and free scope given them within their present circumscribed limits.

As the proof of the pudding is in the eating, it may be well to let my readers form for themselves an idea of the language and plot.

The libretto, containing between eight and ten thousand words, of which passages are given below, was written out for me by Francisco Collazo, the Head Shepherd.

The shepherds have just learned from the Archangel Michael the glad tidings of great joy, and have burst out in pæans of praise and gratitude : —

In the Gate of Bethlehem
There is great light,
For there has been born the Messiah
Who is to set us at liberty.

En el portal de Belen
Hay muy grande claridad,
Porque allá nació el Mécias
Y el nos pondrá en libertad.

And so on through seven verses more, none of significance, excepting the one in which Gila, the Shepherdess, is commanded by the Chief Shepherd to get ready plenty of "tamales" for the subsistence of the shepherds during their journey to Bethlehem.

"Tamales," it must be well known, are one of the staple articles of diet of the Mexicans, who have inherited them from the Aztecs, although something similar may have been known in Spain and Palestine.

Lucifer, called Luzbel in the libretto, now rushes upon the scene and indulges in frenzied soliloquy: "Driven out of heaven by the sword of Michael on account of proud ambition and infamous crime, I boasted of my fault, for the earth was still mine. But what is this I hear? These songs of gladness,—these victorious chants of seraphim? What is this I hear of the Star newly seen in Arabia?" Then he bethinks himself that the fulfilment of time is at hand, the seventy weeks of Daniel have expired, and the prophecies of Ezekiel are accomplished. In Bethlehem he learns that in a manger oxen and asses have kept warm with their breath a little babe whom his fears tell him only too plainly is the Incarnate Word.

There is a very considerable amount of this soliloquy, and it is evident to the most careless listener that Luzbel, or Lucifer, is not at all pleased with the prospect opening before him.

Seeing the band of shepherds and shepherdesses approaching the summit of the hill on which he had taken his stand, he conceals himself to listen to their conversation, and no sooner is he hidden from the eyes of all but the audience than the aged Hermit emerges from his seclusion to greet the procession.

Two of the shepherds—Parrado and Tebano—and Gila, a shepherdess, indulge in singing, telling what great presents of costly stones and jewels they would make to the church, were Fortune kind enough to bless them with abundant means.

We may indulge in the by no means violent conjecture that the pious friar who prepared the original libretto, back in Spain or the Canaries, fancied he saw an opportune moment for inspiring the spectators with proper sentiments of duty towards Holy Mother Church.

Finally, Gila concludes these songs with the following:—

Shepherds, the day is dawning
When joyfully we shall set out
For the Gate of Bethlehem,
To see a great miracle.
Get ready your food,
And arrange your clothes.
Joyfully we'll travel,
Solacing each other with song.

Pastores, ya llégo el día.
En que, alegres, nos partamos,
Para el Portal de Belen.
A ver un feliz milagro.
Compongan sus bastimientos,
Y dispongan bien sus Latas.
Caminemos gustosos,
Festejandonos con cantos.

Then we are treated to a chorus of sixteen verses, one of which will be sufficient :—

With joyful songs,
Like those of nightingale,
Let's gladly march,
Brother shepherds.

En risueños cantos,
De los ruiseñores,
Caminemos alegres,
Hermanos pastores.

They don't forget to take their sheep with them, a fact which is duly recorded in the verses. The Hermit addresses the shepherds, and is kindly received and made to eat of "cabrito" (goat meat), "pinole" (an Aztec dish), tortillas, and "tamales."

One of the shepherd characters — Bartolo — is represented as lazy and gluttonous, always seeking an excuse for rest, instead of progressing on to Bethlehem.

He furnishes whatever of the odd and ridiculous the situation may occasionally demand, while the impotent rage and utter discomfort of Lucifer border closely upon the comical, although they never lose all gravity and seriousness. It is almost time for another chorus, and we get it :—

This is truly the Good Night (Christmas)
Of joy and love,
Because they say
The Divine Redeemer is born,

Esta si que es Noche Buena
De regocijo y amor,
Porque dicen que nació
El Divino Redentor.

More singing is indulged in by the shepherds, Bato, Bartolo, and Parrado, and the Sacred Babe is compared to Samson, Jonah, Solomon, Jesse, David, and Michael.

The Archangel now appears to Bartolo and says to him, "Gloria in excelsis," and repeats the news that Christ is born.

Bartolo awakens his comrades, who have been taking a siesta after their singing, and demands that they give him "albricias," a kind of present which in old times in Spain was always bestowed upon the bearer of good news.

Michael, mingling with the pastoral throng, warns them that Lucifer is approaching, but bids them be of good cheer, that he will defend them.

Luzbel, or Lucifer, meekly advances, assures the shepherds that he is a poor wanderer, and beseeches shelter and food.

His new-found hosts do not like the great amount of black in his garments, or the lion's muzzle which forms his face. Lucifer endeavors to soothe them by saying that he is the richest man in the world, and anxious to share his "hacienda" (treasure) with them.

About this part of the miracle play there are some fine lines,—those in which Lucifer alludes to his former preëminence and fall, and those in which Michael addresses him, although in these last is to be found another anachronism, that in which the Archangel says he will smite Lucifer with the potent name of Mary, who could hardly as yet have been recognized as the mother of the Most High.

Lucifer implores Michael to leave him the dominion of the earth, which has so long been under his control.

This interview with Michael is an "aside," and unperceived by the shepherds, who get ready to sup, and repeat as a grace a sort of burlesque upon the prayers of the monastic orders, which runs thus: "Nominis, santi, adentro, abiscum, pastores, canteis, cantice-flores."

In this part of the work may be detected several solecisms and errors, the most noticeable of which, perhaps, is the word "ejemplador" for "imperador" (emperor), used by Lucifer in describing to the shepherds the wealth and power of his father.

Michael also demands of Lucifer why he presumes to molest these "Christian" (!) shepherds in their pilgrimage.

The Infernal One is soon disposed of, and the shepherds find themselves in front of the manger of Bethlehem.

There is a great increase in the number of hymns and prayers of adoration, each of the shepherds chanting a hymn and reciting a prayer while he deposits his gifts.

Parrado expresses his surprise that the Holy Infant is so small, and hopes he may soon grow big enough to play with his (Parrado's) nephew, "Andrecito."

The gifts are varied, but very cheap, and seem to consist mainly of flowers, bed linen, clothing, playthings, honey, food, and silver, which last is said to have been made by a "platero" (silversmith) from Mexico, a detail which enables us to fix the date of the composition as later than A. D. 1520.

Another circumstance, insignificant in itself, but of consequence in this connection, is that the shepherd "Lizardo" makes a present of "Holanda," or Holland linen.

In the shade of a leafy tree
Lies the Mother of the Great Redeemer,
With scarcely any shelter,
Exhausted with great grief;
And the merry-voiced birds

Caress her and play with Him,
And the little one keeps saying,
"Oh, mamma, how cold the snow is!
Travel along, lady, and be not dismayed,
Because, happy one, soon you 'll reach Bethlehem."

A la sombra de em arbol frondosa,
Esta la madre del Gran Redentor,
Abreviada en su sombra descansa,
Fatigada del grande dolor.
Y las aves con sonrosas voces,
La acarician y juegan con el.
Y el chiquito, llorando, la dice,
Oh maman ! gue fria es la nieve !
Camina, Señora, y no desmayais,
Que à Belen, dichosa, preste llegareis.

The final songs include one of the alphabet, in which each letter is credited with certain qualities, but exactly what all this means it would be hard to say.

The above is but an outlined description of a play which might well demand more elaborate treatment, but as space is limited, and as the libretto is in the hands of the secretary of the American Folk-Lore Society, who no doubt will be pleased to allow scholars to examine it, I deem it best to conclude with the hope that investigation may be made as to the existence within our boundaries of other such religious dramas. The field is surely a large one, and ought to yield some good return if carefully scrutinized by scholars competent to undertake the task. There are settlements of Irish, Welsh, English, Scotch, Germans, Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, Canadian French, Russians, Poles, Italians among us, and surely some of them must have preserved "vestiges" and "survivals" fully as important as this.

John G. Bourke.

EDITOR'S NOTE — It is probable that the text of "Los Pastores," together with an English translation and an introduction, will hereafter appear as a separate volume of the Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society.